

VZCZCXRO5146
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0643/01 1611040
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 101040Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5086
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 3379
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3896
RHMCSUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000643

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S BRIMMER
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON
PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/07/2019
TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [KPAL](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [IR](#)
LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA CALLS FOR EXTENDING HAND TO
ALL PARTIES

REF: BEIRUT 634

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a June 8 meeting with visiting Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and the Ambassador, Prime Minister and Sidon MP-elect Fouad Siniora hailed March 14's victory in the June 7 parliamentary elections (reftel) as the "end of an era" that firmly established the majority's political legitimacy. Although he said that recent government paralysis had demonstrated that a blocking third for the opposition did not work, he nevertheless called for "extending a hand" to all parties. Siniora was determined to improve the socio-economic situation of the people of Sidon, and thanked the U.S. for its ongoing assistance helping to strengthen Lebanon's state institutions. Siniora also praised President Obama's June 4 Cairo speech, expressing his confidence that the President would find a real solution to the 60-year old Arab-Israeli conflict. End summary.

AN END TO AN ERA

2. (C) A relaxed and satisfied Prime Minister Fouad Siniora greeted -- without the presence of his usual advisor and press entourage -- visiting Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and the Ambassador early on June 8, just hours after preliminary predictions indicated a March 14 win in the June 7 parliamentary elections. Mrs. Kathleen LaHood, Chief of Staff Joan DeBoer, Kevin Chapman, Embassy INL Director and Pol/Econ Chief also attended the meeting.

3. (C) Siniora, terming the June 7 parliamentary elections "unique, distinct, and important," said they brought "an end to an era," both in terms of Aoun's claim to being the sole representative of Lebanon's Christians and opposition's claims that March 14 was a "baseless" majority. Now the March 14 majority had "real roots," he said, and the June 7 elections were a "real victory" for the principles of the state, majority rule, and respect for others. Despite

threats and intimidation, there had been no major incidents, he said.

¶4. (C) Noting that the experience of the current national unity government demonstrated that the blocking third "didn't work," Siniora was confident that March 14 would be able to consolidate its majority and form a new government. Citing an Arab proverb that "he who makes the poison eats it," he blamed the March 8 opposition's insistence at Doha to use the 1960 electoral law as the basis for the new law (which he said March 14 had opposed) for its electoral defeat. He nevertheless stressed several times during the meeting the need to "extend a hand to bring people together." The Patriarch, aware of the gravity of the tensions in the run-up to the elections, had played an instrumental role, he said.

¶5. (C) Siniora wondered whether Hizballah would learn any lessons from March 8's defeat. The world is changing, he said, but up until the last day Hizballah was acting against reconciliation because it believed there were trends in its favor, including the new U.S. administration and new openings toward Syria. When Der Spiegel accused Hizballah -- rather than Syria -- of being behind the February 14, 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Hizballah's response was to say it was continuing to build up its military arsenal. Hizballah is in complete confrontation with the international community, he declared, based on what he viewed as the group's excessive power and arrogance.

¶6. (C) Calling his own victory, along with fellow March 14 MP Bahia Hariri, in Sidon "quite a landslide," Siniora recalled

BEIRUT 00000643 002 OF 003

how he had announced his candidacy only two months before the elections. To maintain a "firewall" between Siniora the PM and Siniora the candidate (to avoid appearances that he was using his status as PM for electoral advantage), he did the brunt of his campaigning during the last 15 days, during which he "worked like a bulldozer" and met with over 18,000 constituents. Faced with a well-equipped, financed, and organized opposition, this "major offensive" was necessary to win the election, he said.

¶7. (C) He and Bahia had a series of discussions with various groups in Sidon to give people a sense of ownership, telling them, "If we win, we'll work with you for the next four years." Siniora stressed the need to build better socio-economic institutions in Sidon, and thanked the United States for its support "in all its aspects," including for the army, post-2006 reconstruction assistance, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, and reconstruction of the Nahr al Barid Palestinian refugee camp. The best investment the United States had ever made in Lebanon, however, was the American University of Beirut (Sinior is an alumnus). He looked forward to a continuing friendship with the United States.

PRAISE FOR POTUS SPEECH

¶8. (C) Siniora thanked Secretary LaHood for his visit, saying it was an important message from President Obama. Praising the President's June 4 Cairo speech, he said it indicated how much the new U.S. President was aware of the risks, benefits, and potential in the region. The President had made it clear that Islam was not about killing but about "extending a hand." He called the President "a man of history and of the future" who could find a "real solution for a 60-year old problem." "It can be done," he said, showing his guests a sign by his phone with those words, alluding to Obama's "Yes we can" campaign. But we need to show serious commitment, he added, echoing the President's call for actions and not just words.

¶9. (C) Secretary LaHood told the PM his visit aimed to reiterate the messages of strong U.S. support delivered during the recent visits of Vice President Biden and

Secretary Clinton. He deemed the elections an "extraordinary opportunity for Lebanon," noting that the people had spoken and sent a message to the world that Lebanon was ready to take its place on the international stage. U.S. leaders were ready to work with the new Lebanese leadership, he relayed, adding that President Obama personally was committed to working with the new team to make Lebanon a part of a comprehensive Middle East peace and to creating a new bond with regional leaders. Referring to Siniora's "Lebanon must be at -- not on -- the table" mantra, Secretary LaHood joked that Lebanon would neither be "at the kids' table or at the corner," but instead had a central role to play.

¶10. (C) Siniora noted that he and President Michel Sleiman had a good relationship, better than expected, avoiding a repeat of experiences with previous presidents which had caused the country as a whole to suffer in terms of lost opportunities. President Sleiman "means well," he said simply.

¶11. (C) Siniora said he hoped Israel also understood the President's message. Even if Lebanon was divided internally, it would always be united against Israel, he said. Moreover, Israel had a history of handing Hizballah victories "on a golden platter, i.e., with its 2008 prisoner exchange, its refusal to withdraw from Shebaa Farms and northern Ghajar, and its refusal (until recently) to turn over cluster bomb strike data. Hizballah, along with Syria, Iran, and other extremist groups, were perpetuating each other, he complained, arguing that Iran's goal was to be on the Mediterranean, and that it would be difficult to detach the Syrians -- the "best bargainors in the world" -- from Iran. Siniora professed to be in favor of engagement with Syria,

BEIRUT 00000643 003 OF 003

saying Lebanon wanted to be on the best of terms with Syria. However, the Syrians needed to demonstrate they could play a productive role in peace talks, respecting Lebanon's sovereignty and independence, concepts he said most Syrians had not yet fully accepted.

¶12. (C) Lebanon is the only democracy in the Arab world, Siniora said proudly, with two living former presidents. While it was impossible to impose democracy, it was important to lay the foundations so that people would come to realize democracy was in their interests. People would look at the "hands off" approach in Lebanon and say, "Look! They did it!" It was easier to build relationships based on common values than a lack of commonalties, he suggested.

¶13. (C) Secretary LaHood has cleared this message.
SISON